DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 375 FL 022 128

AUTHOR Kang, Hee-Won; Dutton, Bonnie
TITLE Becoming Multicultural: Helping Students Develop Intercultural Competence.
PUB DATE 11 Feb 94
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at a Meeting of the National Association for Multicultural Education (Detroit, MI, February 11, 1994).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; *Communication Skills; Conflict Resolution; *Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Awareness; *Culture Conflict; Elementary Secondary Education; *Intercultural Communication; *Multicultural Education; Reading Strategies; Skill Development

ABSTRACT

A series of strategies and techniques for helping elementary and secondary students develop a multicultural outlook within the school environment are outlined. It is argued that because of the culture-specific knowledge individuals possess, we draw inferences that influence the way we perceive other people and interpret their actions, resulting in cultural misunderstandings. These inferences are based on our linguistic, speech act, discourse, sociocultural, context, and global knowledge. Strategies for bypassing inappropriate inferences focus on metacognitive skills of monitoring, evaluating, and reformulating inferences and interpretations. Once a conflict or potential conflict is identified, the individual most commonly addresses it by a variety of strategies, including: substituting another inference; questioning the earliest of multiple interpretations; shifting focus; case analysis; distorting information to fit the default interpretation; seeking more information; or dismissing inconsistencies. It is proposed that in order to develop intercultural competence in students, teachers must use approaches, techniques, and activities to develop awareness of individual affective "filters," awareness of different possible interpretations, critical evaluation skills, recognition of inconsistency, and effective strategies to deal with inconsistencies and contradictions. Some of these approaches, techniques, and activities are described. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 375

Becoming Multicultural: Helping Students Develop Intercultural Competence

1994 National Association for Multicultural Education Conference
Detroit, Michigan
February 11, 1994

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Hee-Won Kang

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Hee-Won Kang
Assistant Professor
California State University, Fresno
School of Education and Human Development
Department of Literacy and Early Education
5005 N. Maple
Fresno, CA 93740-0001
(209) 278-0279

Bonnie Dutton
Professor
California State University, Fresno
School of Education and Human Development
Department of Literacy and Early Education
5005 N. Maple
Fresno, CA 93740-0001
(209) 278-0280

FL022128

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Multicultural education has evolved over the years to include a broad range of concerns. These concerns may include, but are not limited to, concerns with transforming the school environment to achieve equality of educational opportunity and equity among all children, with how the curriculum can develop knowledge and understanding about cultural differences and the contributions and history of ethnic groups and nations, with combating racism and discrimination through helping students develop appropriate attitudes and skills for social action, and concerns for the process in which a person becomes multicultural (Bennett, 1990, pp. 11-12).

Though increasing students' knowledge, awareness, and understanding are important objectives toward helping them become multicultural, an equally important one is helping students develop what Bennett (1990) refers to as intercultural competence. Developing such competence means developing "the ability to interpret intentional communications ...some unconscious cues ...and customs in cultural styles different from one's own," as well as "building an understanding of how one is shaped by the values, priorities, language, and norms of one's culture" (p. 293). It is no easy task, as our own culturally-based experiences and knowledge may influence our perceptions and interpretations of the linguistic and non-linguistic behavior of people in cross-cultural interactions.

> Our culture rewards us for producing certain behavior patterns and for ignoring others. This training develops in us...a cultural sieve through which we pour all we perceive. Usually, this cultural filter performs below the conscious level, producing in us cultural blind spots. (Gladstone, 1972, p. 115)

Our experience within a culture influences the knowledge (schema), beliefs, values, and attitudes that we develop over our lifetimes, which in turn influences the way we perceive other people and interpret their actions and behavior. Cultural misunderstandings, according to Robinson (1985), may be a "function of perceptual mismatches between people of different cultures: mismatches in schemas, cues, values, and interpretations" (p. 49).

Through the often culture-specific knowledge we possess, we draw inferences concerning interpretations of verbal and nonverbal acts and the intentions underlying them. Inferencing is a natural part of the processing and comprehension of oral and written communication. There are different kinds of pragmatically relevant knowledge from which we may draw inferences upon in communication: linguistic knowledge, speech act knowledge, discourse knowledge, socio-cultural knowledge, context knowledge, and knowledge of the world (Faerch and Kasper, 1984).

The focus of this paper is not so much on the failures in communication that may occur when we infer meanings and intentions of others based on knowledge that may be culturally different from that of another. The focus is on how inferences that may be inconsistent with other information in the

communicative context may be recognized and what may be done when such inappropriate inferences are detected. This includes discussion of metacognitive skills of monitoring and evaluating inferences and interpretations made, and what particular inferences strategies may be employed when inconsistencies or contradictions between inferences and other information are recognized.

Communication and Miscommunication: Confirming Success and Recognizing Problems

People monitor and evaluate the validity of inferences by checking how they fit in with or cohere with other verbal or nonverbal information in the communicative event and with their expectations based on their pragmatically-relevant knowledge. For example, inferences regarding the illocutionary force of an utterance can be checked as to whether the inference is motivated or justified by what was communicated before or after the act, whether nonverbal signals are contrary to or relevant to the conditions of the inferred act, whether it coheres with known purposes of the speaker, or whether it fits in with one's schema that may call for certain acts at particular junctures in the conversation (Sanders, 1987). Failures in recognizing conversational implicatures may be detected through recognition that other potential types of meanings of the utterance does not cohere with what was said before or after or does not contribute to the progress of the speech event, or through evaluation of an inference in terms of its coherence with symptoms of a subjective state inferred from nonverbal or other information prior to, during, or subsequent to the utterance (Sanders, 1987). Inferences can also be monitored and evaluated according to accompanying contextual cues to meaning and intention. Sometimes inaccurate inferences are due not only to differences in the knowledge upon which they are based, but also to too much focus on the behavior of the person being observed and not enough on external factors related to the context of the situation in which the behavior occurs (Robinson, 1985).

These are some examples of how inferences can be monitored and evaluated. Such monitoring and evaluation may not always result in the detection of failures to infer meanings and intentions, particularly in terms of conversational implicatures. As the degree of difference in the knowledge of communicators from other cultures increases, it gets progressively more difficult and requires progressively more vigilance and cognitive effort to adjust and readjust interpretations of utterances against each other and information from other sources in order to detect and remedy errors (Sanders, 1987).

What helps determine the success or failure of communication across cultures is not only the detection of failures in inferring and interpreting meanings and intentions, but also what communicators do when such failures are recognized. There were a number of potential strategies that interpreters may utilize to deal with these conflicts. Though the list of strategies described below were compiled from studies on reading comprehension conducted by

Collins, Brown, and Larkin (1980), Phillips (1987), and Kang (1991), they may also have relevance to the context of oral communication.

- *Rebinding.* When people recognize that an inference that has just been made is implausible or conflicts with other information, they disconfirm the inference that leads to the conflict and substitute another that fits with their developing interpretations of the communication.

- *Questioning a default interpretation and/or a direct or indirect conflict.* When people find a conflict between a prior inference and later information, they question the prior inference instead of their current interpretation.

- *Shift of focus.* When people have problems resolving conflicts between their interpretations and other information, they may consider related questions to try to get at a solution from another angle.

- *Case analysis and most likely case assignment.* People may raise more than one tentative inference in an effort to constrain possible solutions and converge on one interpretation, analyze different plausible inferences or interpretations and choosing the one that is most likely to lead to a solution of the problem.

- *Assuming a default interpretation and transforming information.* When people encounter a conflict between a previous inference and other subsequent information, they may distort the information to make it fit their previous inference or interpretation. Rather than question the previous inference, they may try to interpret the new information in a way that would confirm the previous inference.

- *Putting a conflict on hold temporarily until more information is available.* People may momentarily be unable or unwilling to resolve a conflict between a prior inference and other information. They may wait until they have processed further information to resolve the conflict, putting the resolution of the conflict on hold pending further information that would help resolve it.

- *Ignoring a conflict or inconsistency or dismissing it as unimportant.* When people encounter a conflict between a prior inference and other information, they may simply ignore the conflict. However, rather than put the conflict on hold, they may decide that the conflict is not important and go on without trying further to resolve the conflict.

As mentioned earlier, these strategies were identified among readers. In the Kang (1991) study, readers used these strategies in the process of confirming and disconfirming inferences concerning meanings of utterances and intentions of characters in a short story. This is quite a different situation than being in the communicative situation as a participant rather than being in the position of overhearer or reader. There are some indications that at least some of these strategies, if not all, may apply in the oral communicative context. For example, when inconsistencies are encountered in a conversation,

a person may adjust the interpretation of a specific utterance to make it cohere with interpretations of prior utterances or may consider a specific interpretation of an utterance as more plausible and adjust interpretations of prior or following utterances to cohere with it (Sanders, 1987). Robinson (1985) discusses the effect that initial inferences and impressions we form about people has upon our processing of later information about them. When people evaluate and form first impressions of others, they may "interpret new information selectively to fit these impressions," discounting or distorting new information that does not fit these impressions (p. 71). In short, people may confirm or disconfirm interpretations of current, prior, or later utterances, or they may discount or distort inconsistent interpretations to make them cohere with other utterances. It needs to be determined if other strategies such as putting resolution of a conflict between utterances on hold until further information, making more than one tentative interpretation and then choosing the most plausible one, etc. Research needs to be done to identify specifically what communicators may do as they encounter inconsistencies or problems with inferences made during interaction with others.

Helping Students Develop Intercultural Competence

In order for our students to develop the kind of intercultural competence that Bennett speaks of, we need to find approaches, techniques, and activities to help students develop:

- awareness that things may not always be as they first seem, and that our own background knowledge and experience filters our perceptions.
- awareness of the potential for different interpretations based on different cultural perspectives and tolerance for different perspectives
- the ability to critically evaluate interpretations and perceptions of nonverbal and verbal behavior, both in terms of what is known and the context, both immediate and extended.
- the ability to recognize when previously made inferences or interpretations are inconsistent with other information
- effective strategies to deal with inconsistencies and contradictions.

There are a number of techniques and activities that have been designed to increase the awareness of differences in cultural perspectives. For example, Seelye (1976) introduces activities such as culture assimilators, in which descriptions of incidents of cross cultural interaction that produce miscommunications are followed by questions and feedback on answers, and culture capsules, in which explanations of cross-cultural differences are followed by questions and multi-media activities, to teach cultural concepts and increase awareness of different cultural perspectives. Citing some limitations of these and other activities such as mini-dramas, cultural simulations and role plays, Robinson (1985) discusses how to help students learn to cope with

potentially threatening cultural situations through a social learning approach that emphasizes mastery through modeling, observation of positive consequences, graduated participation in modeled tasks, etc. (See Robinson, 1985, Chapter 7, for a complete description of the rationales, tasks, and conditions of this procedure.)

There are plenty of other exercises, games, simulations, and activities for cross-cultural education. However, to help students develop the abilities to understand and learn about different cultures on their own as they engage with people in social interaction, activities are needed that give students chances to reflect on their own and others' processes and strategies of comprehending and understanding verbal and nonverbal behavior as they try to interpret such interaction. In other words, activities which give students chances to reflect on and report inferences or interpretations of verbal and nonverbal behavior, listen to reports of other students, evaluate those inferences and interpretations, recognize inconsistencies or confirm interpretations, and effectively deal with inconsistencies are needed to help students develop the competence and strategies to understand and learn from experience in different cultural situations on their own.

One such activity that could be utilized is the Directed Reading Thinking Activity. The Directed Reading Thinking Activity is an instructional format for teaching reading that focuses not only on the active comprehension of text, but also on the process of understanding (Walker, 1988; Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, 1990). It encourages students to apply metacognitive skills by having them make inferences about what is happening and what is going to happen and then read the text to confirm or disconfirm them.

In the activity, groups of students silently read a story together and stop at points to make hypotheses and predictions, discuss why they made them, and also discuss justifications or support found in the story for making previous inferences. In the prereading stage of the activity, the group looks over the title and initial illustrations, then predicts what will happen in the story. In the active reading stage, the students read the portion of the story, then stop at predetermined points to discuss questions such as the following:

What do you think is happening now?
What makes you think so?
What do you think will happen next?
What makes you think so?

The activity can be adapted to explicitly include questions that elicit inferences about motivations, intentions, mental states, emotions, etc., underlying characters' verbal and physical behavior, if such inferences are not elicited by the above questions. After discussing these questions, students then silently read to the next stopping point in the text, seeking to find information that may either confirm or disconfirm their previous inferences or predictions. Individual interpretations, inferences, or predictions may be justified by information in the text or the students' background knowledge.

There are several points to keep in mind. Groups consisting of students from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds and stories written from various cultural perspectives may elicit more of a variety of inferences and interpretations. It is important that acceptance of a diversity of viewpoints and inferences be encouraged. The internal criteria for evaluating their own interpretations should be whether or not readers can justify to themselves their own interpretations, and not some ideal or consensual interpretation of the text. Also, the discussion among students need not focus only on the differences in the interpretations or inferences made at any part of the story, but also on the similarities between interpretations and inferences that may help lead to the realization that there are similarities as well as differences between different cultures and between individuals.

Through this type of activity, hopefully students will be able to recognize that there may be different ways of interpreting a particular event or behavior and begin to develop an awareness of the relationship between culture and behavior, both linguistic and non-linguistic. It will also help them develop the skills to monitor their comprehension of the text and use the context and other information to confirm or disconfirm inferences about the intentions, knowledge, and social customs underlying verbal and nonverbal behavior. During monitoring or consultations with different groups or in a final whole group or whole class discussion, the teacher should always be on the lookout for evidence that the students are ignoring contradictions, transforming information in the text to fit previous interpretations or inferences, or that they are unable to consider the context in which the action or event took place. The teacher should take every opportunity to reinforce the use of appropriate problem-solving strategies, point out information in the text that may have been ignored or distortions that the students have made, and encourage students to evaluate their interpretations and inferences in light of information from text. If the teacher feels that students need more direction in developing the abilities to recognize inconsistencies and to employ appropriate strategies when encountering inconsistencies, he or she may, through joining the reading group or through incorporation of other instructional activities, help students to find supporting clues, show them how to move from the clues to the answer, and model appropriate problem-solving strategies, moving gradually from modeling this process to guided practice to independent practice (Pearson, 1985; cited in May, 1990)

This is only one example of the type of activity that can be used to help students develop the monitoring and problem-solving strategies to help them in their generation of inferences and interpretations of verbal and nonverbal behavior. Of course, the use of written text does not provide opportunities for students to gain as much exposure to nonverbal forms of communication and their relationship and sequencing to utterances. Video can be used in activities similar to the DRTA. Groups of students can view segments of the video, discuss inferences, predictions, or interpretations and their rationales, and then view more segments, monitoring the validity of their inferences or interpretations and dealing with inconsistencies when encountered and recognized. Segments can be played several times in different ways such as

with sound only or visuals only as well as with both visuals and sound in order to focus attention on different aspects such as nonverbal cues, prosodic cues, the context of the interaction, etc. Open-ended role-plays or semi-scripted dramas, if extended enough, can also utilize pauses in the activities for students to reflect on and discuss inferences, interpretations, and justifications for such.

Concluding Remarks

The concerns and activities discussed here are only one aspect of a range of concerns in helping student become multicultural and the activities mentioned above only a fraction of the different types of approaches, activities, techniques, and exercises to increase intercultural awareness and competence. For example, affective factors can and do influence interpretations, and students may need help in coping with these factors, particularly in cultural situations perceived as potentially threatening. But the concerns and activities above should be integrated into programs whose objectives include student development of intercultural competence. The main thing is to provide opportunities for students to reflect on inferences or interpretations they have made and how they may be different or similar to those of people from different as well as similar backgrounds. Students need encouragement and practice in justifying their interpretations of verbal and nonverbal actions by finding coherence with other cues and utterances, recognizing inconsistencies when they arise, and employing appropriate strategies to deal with such inconsistencies.

The attempts to infer what is being said and meant, to evaluate inferences, and detect and solve problems with inferences may be paralleled with the effort to infer rules and conventions of the society and culture of the participants, infer background knowledge that they rely upon, evaluate such inferences in terms of their coherence with prior and subsequent information and experiences, and solve problems or contradictions with such inferences. Repeated interactions with people from other cultures, observation of regularities and patterns of verbal and nonverbal actions that cohere, and detection and remedy of misunderstandings provide support for making inferences concerning some rules and conventions of expression in other cultures (Sanders, 1987). As we make and test hypotheses about other cultures, about the person we are talking to, about rules, conventions, contextual cues, etc., we may continually revise and update the knowledge we are relying upon in the interaction itself. The knowledge that we activate in understanding communication is not necessarily static, but may be continually changing as we engage in communication, and inferences and interpretations that we make both to comprehend communication and also to understand and learn aspects of the culture may be continually added to the knowledge that we are utilizing in the communicative act. The same type of evaluation and problem-solving strategies may be utilized in the process of making and testing hypotheses that eventually may lessen the degree of differences in the knowledge that is brought to the communicative situation by the participants and help to increase the probability of success in the use of such metacognitive and cognitive skills and strategies.

References

Bennett, C. I. (1990). *Comprehensive multicultural education: Theory and practice (2nd. ed.).* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Collins, A., Brown, J. S., & Larkin, K. M. (1980). Inference in text understanding. In R. J. Spiro, B. V. Bruce, & W. F. Brewer (Eds.), *Theoretical issues in reading comprehension* (pp. 385–407). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Faerch, C. & Kasper, G. (1984). Pragmatic knowledge: Rules and procedures. *Applied Linguistics*, 5(3): 214-225.

Gladstone, J. R. (1972). Language and culture. In H. B. Allen and R. N. Campbell (Eds.), *Teaching english as a second language* (pp.192-195). San Francisco, CA: McGraw-Hill International Book Company.

Kang, H. W. (1991). *Opening a window into the process of reading in a second language.* Unpublished dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

May, F. B. (1990). *Reading as communication (3rd. ed.).* Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Company.

Pearson, P. D. (1985). Changing the face of reading comprehension instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 38,* 724-738.

Phillips, L. M. (1987). *Inference strategies in reading comprehension.* (Tech. Rep. No. 410). Urbana–Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading.

Robinson, G. L. (1985). *Crosscultural understanding.* New York, NY: Pergamon Press.

Sanders, R. E. (1987). *Cognitive foundations of calculated speech: Controlling understandings in conversation and persuasion.* New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Seelye, H. N. (1976). *Teaching culture.* Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company.

Tierney, R. J., Readence, J. E., & Dishner, E. K. (1990). *Reading strategies and practices: A compendium (3rd. ed.).* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Walker, B. J. (1988). *Diagnostic teaching of reading.* Columbus, OH: Merrill Publishing Company.